

From: Lawrence, Rob
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Rob Lawrence
Region 6
Policy Advisor - Energy Issues
214.665.6580

From: Casso, Ruben
Sent: Wednesday, January 28, 2015 8:21 AM
To: Lawrence, Rob
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REGULATION: Texas reverses itself on urban oil and gas inspections

Mike Lee, E&E reporter

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Texas oil and gas regulators are backing away from a proposal to do more inspections at urban drilling sites, saying they want to do more public outreach instead.

Christi Craddick, chairman of the Texas Railroad Commission, floated the idea of doing more inspections in populated areas in December, a month after residents in Denton, Texas, voted to ban hydraulic fracturing in their city ([EnergyWire](#), Dec. 10, 2014).

Yesterday, Railroad Commission Executive Director Milton Rister said he had studied the issue and wanted to take a different approach.

"We really have no indication that there [is] any greater rate of noncompliance with state law or commission rules by oil and gas operators in that urban area than anywhere else in the state of Texas," Rister said during a webcast of yesterday's commission meeting.

Instead, Rister said he wanted to add a community liaison officer to the Commission's Fort Worth office and a staffer to better coordinate the inspections among the existing staff.

The three commissioners didn't vote on the proposal; Craddick called the ideas "good first-step recommendations."

Commissioner Ryan Sitton, who was elected in November, asked Rister to look for ways to reach a broader audience.

"We've got 27 million Texans that we work for here; how do we talk to that group?" he asked.

The Railroad Commission, which regulates oil and gas in Texas, has been struggling with its response to urban drilling for almost a decade, when the advent of modern fracking allowed energy companies to drill into deep formations that were previously inaccessible and that lay beneath populated areas.

Part of the Barnett Shale gas field, where fracking was pioneered, lies under the western half of the Dallas-Fort Worth metro area, which has a population of 6.4 million. There were protests when drilling began to push into Fort Worth and other cities in 2004 and 2005. Some wells were located within 300 feet of homes and other sensitive areas.

The commission opened a satellite office in Fort Worth in 2008 after complaints that it had failed to inspect wells in the city.

Voters in Denton, a college town of 125,000 about 45 miles north of Dallas, opted to ban fracking -- but not drilling -- in a citywide referendum Nov. 4. The city was promptly sued ([E&ENews PM](#), Nov. 5, 2014).

Other cities have passed ordinances that severely restricted oil and gas development. Dallas adopted a 1,500-foot setback requirement between homes and gas wells, and city officials have discussed tighter drilling standards in Mansfield, Lubbock and College Station ([EnergyWire](#), Dec. 8, 2014).

Critics, including the activists who organized the Denton fracking ban, say they've been forced to act because the Railroad Commission is too cozy with the oil and gas industry and doesn't do enough to prevent air pollution and other problems.

Rister said part of the problem is that urban dwellers don't understand the role of the Railroad Commission. The state is in charge of regulating the actual drilling of wells, but it has no authority over noise, traffic and other downsides of drilling that lead to frequent complaints.

"In the urban area, what we need to do is have someone reach out -- to our local elected officials, our community leaders, chambers of commerce, Realtors, civic groups, whatever -- and try to get in front of them," Rister said.

The inspection coordinator would work with the liaison and also help organize the disparate staff in charge of inspections. The Railroad Commission's local districts were drawn decades ago during previous oil and gas booms, and many of the state's biggest new fields are divided among several offices. The Barnett Shale field, for instance, is policed by inspectors in Kilgore, Abilene and Wichita Falls, all of which are more than 100 miles away.